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ABSTRACT

Consolidation has become both a solution for small, rural school districts and a contentious policy fraught with numerous difficulties. Despite concerns about limited curricula and higher operating expenses, there is no generalizable evidence that students educated in rural settings underachieve or have deficient social skills. Recent research has found that socioeconomic status, English proficiency, and cultural factors are major indicators of student achievement, not school size and geographic location. This report explores alternative solutions to making needed improvements, including interdistrict sharing, partial reorganizations, extradistrict cooperation, and the use of intermediary units and instructional technologies, and describes the promises and limitations of such alternatives. Districts pooling limited resources are, in effect, increasing their overall enrollment base. Arrangements requiring only minimal involvement are the easiest to sustain. Sharing ease or difficulty depends on factors such as stability, consensus, distribution of benefits, competition, and expense. Three successful examples of partial reorganization include central high school districts, cluster districts, and districts operating student exchange programs. Extradistrict cooperation results when a district receives program support, services, or equipment from area businesses, governmental agencies, nonprofit groups, and postsecondary institutions. Intermediary units are frequently mandated, directed, and funded by the state to coordinate the sharing of resources, teachers, and specialized staff and services. Consolidation and cooperation are contrary policies attempting to accomplish the same goals, but neither fully resolves the problems of small, rural schools. (12 references) (MLH)

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ALTERNATIVES TO SCHOOL DISTRICT CONSOLIDATION

BETHANN BERLINER

Introduction

Between the end of World War II and the mid-1980s the number of school districts in the United States dropped from 101,382 to 15,747 (*National Center for Education Statistics*, 1988). This dramatic change was primarily the result of thousands of small, rural school districts consolidating. Consolidation—the creation of a single, larger school district from two or more smaller ones—has become both a solution for small, rural school problems and a contentious policy fraught with a wide range of difficulties.

For many educators and policymakers, the small size and geographic isolation that typify rural schools are the roots of their problems. Rural educators have limited access to new ideas, collegiality and educational resources. They often find it hard to provide adequate and varied instructional programs, student services and extracurricular activities, partly because of the struggle to attract and retain qualified teachers. Their schools are often burdened with inadequate facilities, high per pupil costs, and—throughout much of the nation—declining enrollments. These woes may be compounded by such community characteristics as low real estate values and personal incomes, small tax revenues, high rates of unemployment, and an aging and declining population, all of which hamper efforts to improve the local school.

These issues fueled the first wave of consolidation from the 1940s through the 1960s. Because of its sweeping success, the first signs of slowing were not apparent until the 1970s. Consolidation slowed even further in the 1980s due to the back-to-basics movement and the political climate of New Federalism—favoring the view that bigger is not always better. Just when consolidation appeared to have run its course, a new frustration with endemic rural problems prompted another push for it. With high inflation and plummeting rural school enrollments in the late 1980s, many educators and policymakers returned to consolidation as a way to reduce costs and enrich curricular offerings.

Consolidation—rural or urban—is a thorny issue at best. Urban educators tend to be more amenable to it than rural educators. Taxpayers tend to be of two minds: they view the neighborhood school as essential but also as a financial burden. The research on the efficacy of district consolidation is inconclusive. While consolidation clearly solves some problems, it creates others. Yet it has been, and continues to be, a course chosen by beleaguered rural districts. While ardent supporters tout its strengths, others, convinced its shortcomings outweigh its benefits, promote organizational alternatives other than consolidation to better serve the needs of rural students and teachers and the communities in which they live.

It is these alternatives that form the focus of this paper. In order to understand what promises they hold, we first need to understand why consolidation is viewed by some as the salvation of small, rural schools and by others as their last resort.

Equity and Efficiency: Is Bigger Better?

Proponents of consolidation believe that district mergers lead to equity and efficiency. Combining districts, they say, affords rural students educational opportunities equal to those of their urban peers and allows schools to take advantage of economies of scale. This last is stressed because very small, isolated districts tend to spend considerably more than others per pupil due to high operating, transportation and maintenance costs. When a state considers a school too small, whether its enrollment falls below 500, 250, 75 or 35, it is concluding that there are serious limitations to the curriculum and excessive costs to the school operation.

Many educators and policymakers consider these arguments incontrovertible. For years it followed that since small, rural schools had difficulty offering a comprehensive and diversified curriculum, and operated at a high per pupil cost, the best solution was to create bigger schools and bigger districts. But, in fact, while bigger may be better in terms of expanding educational programs and cost savings, it does not consistently hold up in practice.

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Educational equity encompasses more than just diverse programs. It has to do with achievement, social development and comprehensiveness of curriculum. There is no generalizable evidence that students in small, rural schools underachieve based on standardized tests or have deficient social skills (Monk and Haller, 1986; Edington and Martellaro, 1988). In studies conducted from New York to New Mexico, scholars find that socio-economic status, English proficiency and cultural factors are major indicators of student achievement, not school size and geographic isolation. Other studies show that students attending small, rural schools are at least as likely as their urban peers to graduate from high school.

Students in these schools may actually have social advantages. Because they are likely to participate more in extracurricular activities, they have opportunities to develop social competencies such as leadership and group processing skills.

There is rightful concern about the comprehensiveness of the curriculum many small, rural schools offer. It is difficult or impossible for these schools to offer advanced placement courses, vocational training, special education or foreign languages. In the smallest, most remote schools the curriculum can be so limited that it does not qualify students to meet state graduation requirements or entrance requirements to college. And due to remoteness and limited resources of all types, attracting and retaining the best teachers, particularly in specialized content areas, is problematic.

But the overarching issue is whether consolidation is the only solution. Are there other alternatives for making needed improvements? Those favoring consolidation usually argue that curricular richness hinges on level of enrollment; increase the number of students, and you can offer extra courses and more specialized instruction. But researchers argue that in practice, specialized instruction and a comprehensive curriculum are not functions of school size; they happen when teachers have strong content knowledge and pedagogical skills (Edington and Martellaro, 1988; Walberg and Fowler, 1987). In other words, what counts is effective use of instructional strategies in the classroom, not school or district enrollment figures. Furthermore, evidence suggests that only a small percentage of students take advantage of expanded curricular offerings.

Those who would consolidate for efficiency point out that bigger districts can allocate fixed costs over a larger enrollment base and offer a more varied curriculum by increasing class sizes. For example, it costs a district less per pupil to offer the same geometry course or counseling service to 30 students rather than to three.

While in theory size efficiencies sound impressive, in practice consolidation can have unanticipated effects that mitigate cost savings. Follow-up studies of consolidated districts suggest that economies of scale are only as likely to result as diseconomies of scale. Where the balance tips depends on a combination of local factors (Monk and Haller, 1986; Walberg and Fowler, 1987). Additionally, what looks like a cost saving often turns out to be a cost shift. Closing a school, for example, decreases district maintenance outlay. But with more students being bused greater distances to attend school, it also increases transportation costs. Moreover, there may be substantial "hidden" costs such as unemployment and early retirement benefits paid to laid-off faculty and staff or fees for storing unused school equipment and materials.

Despite their small size and isolation—and because of it—many small, rural schools have sought equity and efficiency by creating, experimenting with, and modifying alternative ways to organize.

Consolidation also entails human costs, and in the minds of community residents these often far outweigh considerations of dollars and cents. Of paramount concern is the loss of the neighborhood school, with its caring student-teacher contact, ease of curriculum articulation, high levels of parent and community involvement and support, access to extracurricular activities and lack of serious student discipline problems. Studies of the effects of school closures on small towns document the withering of community cohesion and the local economy (Peshkin, 1982; Rincones, 1988). Schools are major employers in small towns, and with closures come layoffs. Longstanding, family-operated businesses suffer as parents find it convenient to purchase goods and use services in the more populous, and generally more developed, communities in which their children attend school. For many small communities, closing a school has led to neighborhood deterioration and population decline.

No Best Solution

Evidence that consolidation succeeds in providing equity and efficiency is equivocal at best. But it is clear that consolidation engenders a host of community concerns. The closing of a school assaults civic pride and raises serious concerns about economic vitality, the locus of educational decisionmaking and the very future of the community's youth. Some see it as the death of a dream—the traditional neighborhood school. For others, it symbolizes the beginning of the end of community survival.

Thousands of small, rural schools remain open. Some simply have not had the option to consolidate; others have fiercely demanded their independence. Despite their

small size and isolation—and because of it—many of these schools have sought equity and efficiency by creating, experimenting with, and modifying alternative ways to organize. Alternatives such as inter-district sharing, partial reorganizations, extra-district cooperation and the use of intermediary units and instructional technologies are attempts to attain the intended outcomes of consolidation without the loss of independence and community pride. The following describes the promises and limitations of these alternatives.

Inter-District Sharing

Inter-district sharing results when two or more districts voluntarily and cooperatively exchange and improve school programs by combining resources. Many small, rural school districts share staff, students, programs and services. Consider the two districts that jointly employ a calculus teacher; she teaches in one district in the morning, the other in the afternoon. Elsewhere, students might be bused to one district for foreign language instruction and to another for chemistry and physics. Districts sometimes share nurses, bus drivers, sports facilities, snow plows, the cost of supplies and equipment, staff development programs, and even principals and superintendents (Galvin, 1986).

Districts that pool limited resources are, in effect, increasing their overall enrollment base. Students gain access to expanded curricular and extracurricular options. They may attend a specific course or an entire grade level in another district. Or the benefits of inter-district programs, services and staff may be fully available in their home districts. In most small, rural districts, sharing contributes to cost effectiveness but does not reduce overall costs. Real costs, in fact, may increase, but since the quality and operation of the local school improves many communities are able to resist consolidation.

The literature is filled with testimonials from rural educators and scholars on how shared organizational arrangements result in better schooling and more efficient school operations (Ditzler, L., 1984; Galvin, P., 1986; Jones, P. & Hendrickson, J., 1988; Schmidt, G., 1983; Sederberg, C., 1985). For example, many rural districts in Maine and California reduce administrative costs and streamline administrative practices by sharing superintendents. The inter-district alternative school in Alabama, the itinerant substance abuse prevention program in Kansas, and the cooperative curriculum planning activities in Idaho and Wisconsin are among the many other examples that attest to the success of sharing and support the perception that it is a viable alternative to consolidation.

There is, however, mounting evidence that such success is not easily achieved. Arrangements requiring only minimal involvement of participants is easier to initiate and sustain than those calling for extensive coordination and some surrender of autonomy. It is easier to share in the purchasing and warehousing of office supplies, for example, than it is to share a Spanish teacher. Teacher sharing means making joint decisions about curriculum, textbooks, instructional methods, schedules, long-term calendar and transportation. The number of stakeholders involved is considerably larger than that required to coordinate the sharing of office supplies, a snow plow or school bus.

School and community characteristics also help or hurt sharing efforts. Scholars and rural educators agree that the ease or difficulty of sharing depends upon the following (Monk and Haller, 1986; Galvin, 1986):

Stability

Fluctuation in enrollment and student interests can complicate shared school programs and turnover among the teaching and administrative staff is also an obstacle. Unstable staffing leads to discontinuity in district priorities and coordination of shared resources. Conversely, when the same staff work together over time, they develop mutual trust and a common instructional and administrative vision.

Consensus

For districts to successfully share resources there must be agreement among the stakeholders about the purpose of the joint program or service and how it will be implemented.

Distribution of Benefits

For inter-district sharing to be successful, the outcomes must be mutually beneficial, and those benefits must seem to outweigh the costs. A sense of mutual benefit, however, is difficult to achieve when districts vary in size, resources and degree of isolation. Wealthier and larger districts often feel unfairly burdened by sharing their resources with poorer and smaller districts, while poorer and smaller districts may feel their bigger partner is taking too much control.

Competition

Districts may compete for the governance of the shared program or service or the distribution of resources.

Expense

Sharing can generate expenses, since it costs more to cooperatively offer a program or service than not to offer it at all. The costs of purchasing new equipment, funding additional staff, and increasing the work load of those coordinating the arrangements are substantial.

Inter-district relationships are both complex and costly in terms of money, time and risk. In some districts sharing only postpones the inevitability of consolidation; in others it has proven to be a feasible way to ensure autonomy and preserve the local school without sacrificing educational equity or operational efficiency.

To achieve success, rural districts must overcome logistical difficulties that are compounded by their small size and isolation. Low and declining enrollments may cause instability in program choices and staffing. Long distances between districts may curtail efforts to build consensus or may feed community suspicion. Additional expenses associated with sharing may be a major hurdle for very small districts that have few resources. And it must be remembered that cost effective school improvements are not cost savings. Only those districts that share their programs and services for a price are likely to attain real cost savings.

Partial Reorganizations

Partial reorganizations alter the structure of service delivery and day-to-day school operations without dismantling community-based schooling. Three of the most successful examples of partial reorganizations are central high school districts, cluster districts and districts that operate student exchange programs. More akin to inter-district sharing than to consolidation, partial reorganizations are widely viewed as the middle ground. They enable communities to preserve the local school and maintain a key role in school governance while benefitting from a collective enrollment base, shared resources and economies of scale.

Central high school districts are created when two or more districts combine high school programs and vest authority in a new board while retaining separate elementary programs. The preservation of the elementary district gives parents and taxpayers control over the education of their youngest students—important in small towns, since a thriving elementary school is a source of community pride and symbol of vitality. Since small size and the resulting limitations in curricular and extracurricular activities are most problematic at the secondary level, centralization, like consolidation, can engineer enrollment increases and opportunities to expand course offerings, student services, and the size and quality of the teacher corps. It also seems the process of operating a central high school reduces small town parochialism and facilitates school improvement.

The chief limitation of a central high school district is the difficulty of curriculum articulation. Since the elementary districts are autonomous, there is no mechanism to bridge the feeder districts to one another or to the high school. For the central high school to expand curricular and extracurricular activities and to operate more efficiently than would several smaller schools, there needs to be strong and stable community support. In rural areas that have more than one high school within commuting distance, support for the central high school fluctuates if large numbers of parents shop among the available high schools.

Cluster districts are created when small, rural school districts collaborate and share resources to promote school improvement. The initial clustering is often facilitated by a support organization such as a state agency. Unlike districts that informally share programs and services, clusters tend to have contractual, long-term relationships, involve several districts and almost exclusively share programmatic and administrative resources. Each district maintains its autonomy while collectively establishing specific programs or services through pooled resources and ideas. Examples of successful cluster activities are joint curriculum planning, microcomputer inservice training, student sports, community education programs and coordination of itinerant specialists (Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory, 1985).

> *Some districts share nurses, bus drivers, sports facilities, snow plows, the cost of supplies and equipment, staff development programs, and even principals and superintendents.*

Successful clusters have well articulated goals, a group decision-making process and informal leadership. They are most prevalent in regions that have contiguous small communities committed to preserving and improving the local schools. In South Dakota, for example, four very small districts formed a cluster to address enrollment declines, budget constraints and pressures to expand the curriculum and diversify student services. Collectively the districts fund, staff and administer a driver education program, speech therapist, software exchange, parent helpers organization, adult courses and teacher inservice activities.

Clusters also benefit districts by reducing professional isolation. They facilitate inter-district contact among teachers and create opportunities for administrators to discuss common problems, leadership styles and the application of effective schools research. The cluster, rather than district, is the organizational structure through which curricular, extracurricular and professional development offerings are expanded and cost effectiveness achieved.

While clustering is a promising alternative to consolidation, it involves considerable organization and numerous stakeholders. Clusters are not formed by goodwill, but rather by a joint commitment to sharing resources for mutual benefit.

Initiating and sustaining this commitment is difficult because of the complexity of inter-district relationships, instability of staffing and enrollments, changing district priorities and the expense of providing additional programs and services.

Another example of a partial reorganization is sending students to neighboring districts—even across state lines—to attend high school. The practice of exchanging students for tuition is common in remote areas like the Utah-Wyoming border and upper New York state. The advantage for small districts is that they avoid the cost of operating their own high school. Moreover, depending upon the wealth and size of the neighboring district, tuition costs can be modest. In many states tuition charged by the receiving district is based on the difference between that district's costs and the amount of state aid the increased enrollment generates (Monk and Haller, 1986).

The chief limitation is that the sending district loses all formal influence over the secondary program. Informally, it can threaten to withdraw its students from the receiving school. But due to the remoteness, harsh terrain and small size of many communities, shopping for another high school is often unfeasible.

Partial reorganizations can also be creative or experimental responses to school improvement needs. Some variations on itinerancy, for example, rotate teachers as well as mobile classrooms. In North Dakota, a group of rural districts share a woodworking van that is equipped with a teacher, tools and work space. Other districts have reorganized the school schedule by instituting a four-day week. This schedule is designed to reduce expenditures on transportation and heat while affording a fifth day for extracurricular activities, program planning and professional development. A few rural districts are even experimenting with ways to heighten student aspirations and exposure to cultural and ethnic diversity by sponsoring various student exchange programs.

Extra-District Cooperation

Efforts to maintain independence and provide quality educational programs have prompted many small, rural districts to establish professional relationships outside the K-12 system. Extra-district cooperation results when a district or cluster of districts receives program support, services or equipment from area businesses, governmental agencies, non-profit organizations and post-secondary institutions.

Rural schools benefit greatly from the expertise and resources outside organizations provide. Successful extra-district cooperation requires that districts and organizations govern in partnership, maintain a long-term commitment and respond to changing educational and organizational priorities. The chief drawbacks are that outside organizations are highly bureaucratic and primarily serve clients other than the districts, often making it difficult for them to coordinate programs and respond to school needs.

Perhaps the simplest extra-district arrangement to coordinate is a link between post-secondary programs and the secondary curriculum. In Iowa, for example, a nine-district cluster arranges a half-day high school schedule for those students who choose to attend the area community college for vocational training in office management, engineering, agriculture and health care assistance. In central Arkansas, the regional university provides services to rural districts ranging from dropout prevention and professional development programs to evaluations of school improvement efforts and curriculum reviews.

Extra-district arrangements are more difficult to coordinate when the outside organization is not an educational institution. Creating a school program at a dairy farm, machine shop, hospital or bank is quite different from sending students to courses at an area college, but can be successfully done. A cluster of rural districts in Missouri, for example, contracts with local businesses to provide on-site occupational training based on individualized performance criteria. The district compensates business people who serve as instructors and the student interns earn high school credit. Another cluster of rural districts in California participates in a vocational training program sponsored by a County Parks and Recreations Department. Without significant capital outlay or additional staffing, community-based school programs diversify the curriculum, provide services and build partnerships between schools and the communities they serve.

Intermediary Units

Many states have structured organizations that exist apart from the districts and facilitate inter-district sharing. While the districts remain autonomous, the intermediary unit governs shared programs and services. Intermediary units, like the board of cooperative educational services of New York, are frequently mandated, directed and funded by the state to coordinate the sharing of courses, teachers, and specialized staff as well as services such as purchasing, warehousing and maintenance.

The intermediary system is a particularly effective means of providing special services to districts where only a few students may need them. Since only a small proportion of rural students require special education or request vocational training, for example, intermediary units like regional cooperatives can much more cost effectively offer these services by pooling enrollments and resources. A cooperative in Virginia provides classes for visually impaired, hearing impaired and multiply handicapped students from six neighboring rural districts that previously could not offer low incidence special education. Another cooperative in Massachusetts

sponsors a vocational training program where students from several districts attend class at regional businesses and industries and collaboratively operate a restaurant.

Other intermediary units offer a broad range of programs and services. In central Arkansas, the area education service cooperative employs more than 20 itinerant teachers, maintains an early childhood and adult education center, houses instructional materials, and provides staff development programs for teachers and administrators. It coordinates a joint printing shop and the cooperative purchasing of more than 850 items, including office supplies, athletic gear and audio-visual and computer equipment. The cooperative also supports two mobile resource centers, one is a media library and the other is a Make and Take Center which brings holiday decorations, art supplies, a laminator and a binding machine to each school weekly. Cooperative staff also assist districts in curriculum development, grant writing and program evaluation.

Intermediary units, like the Arkansas cooperative or the regional service centers of Utah, Texas and Pennsylvania, are an acknowledgement from the state that partially reorganized districts achieve the enrollment increases of consolidation without dismantling community-based schooling. By servicing regional needs, they help small, rural districts offer equal educational opportunities, use resources more effectively, comply with state and federal mandates and provide costly services. Still, some districts resist the intermediary system because they feel that the control they would lose may outweigh possible equity and efficiency gains (Monk and Haller, 1986).

Instructional Technology

Instructional technologies are alternative forms of instruction rather than organizational alternatives. They often involve the cooperation of many districts, an intermediary unit and outside technical resources. Of particular promise are distance learning technologies such as two-way television, one-way television with audio return and audiographics which make live, interactive instruction possible across great distances.

The linking of districts through telephone, radio, satellite, computer networking and telefax gives rural schools access to a broader range of curricular offerings and staffing options without affecting enrollment levels. Even the smallest, most remote school can offer advanced placement courses, vocational training or remedial assistance through distance learning. Interactive technologies also redistribute staff without relocating them geographically. Teachers from participating schools both broadcast and receive courses in an exchange with neighboring or distant districts.

Using interactive technology requires a particularly high level of commitment among the sharing districts. Joint decisions need to reached about scheduling, programming, staffing, grading and funding as well as constructing appropriate facilities, upgrading equipment and providing training. The complexity of inter-district relationships coupled with the technologies' high initial costs in part explains why distance learning is not more widespread. Skeptics also claim that telelearning is impersonal, allows little scheduling flexibility, and is often fraught with technical problems. While there are successful models of distance learning, little evidence exists that instruction in these programs is actually effective. Moreover, interactive technology requires changing familiar teaching strategies, and teachers in general are reluctant to do that.

Variations on a Theme

Educators and policymakers agree that small, rural schools face serious problems and that the status quo is unacceptable. Claims of educational inequity, inefficiency, and difficulty recruiting and retaining high quality teachers attest to the immediate need for improvement. What educators and policymakers do not agree upon is the best course of action for districts and states to take.

For decades, consolidation has been considered a viable, if flawed, policy for thousands of small, rural districts. Its momentum is based on the popular belief that larger, multi-school districts favor program equity, comprehensive student services and efficiency. But at what expense? No certain improvements in either equity or efficiency are achieved through consolidation and, at the same time, important educational and social costs are incurred (Monk and Haller, 1986).

The belief that these costs outweigh any real benefits has prompted many districts to create alternative ways to resist consolidation. Inter-district or other cooperative arrangements preserve small, rural districts and allow them to benefit from collective enrollments, shared resources and economies of scale. For many communities, efforts to retain control of their schools are as heartfelt as efforts to improve the schools.

Consolidation and cooperation are contrary policies that set out to accomplish the same goals, but neither fully resolves the problems of small, rural schools. Both are reorganizational policies, with consolidation transforming small, rural schools into bigger rural schools and cooperation enabling small schools to create certain bigger school advantages. Underlying the problems rural schools face are broader, more fundamental, social, economic and geographic conditions which school reorganization cannot directly effect. Reorganization alone is not the answer to an aging population, extreme isolation, the uncertain future of communities hurt by drought, the closing of lumber mills, or other local conditions.

School reorganization in its various forms needs state support. States can help by:

- Encouraging districts to determine for themselves the best organizational structure to suit local needs.

- Working with districts to establish the terms of consolidations, partial reorganizations or contracts among sharing districts.

- Providing adequate *necessity aid* to districts that wish to remain small and improve the quality of educational programs and services.

- Linking school reorganizational policies to community renewal and economic development activities.

By definition, small, rural schools have the advantages and limitations of small size and geographic isolation. Any policy designed to address size and isolation also results in trade offs. For district reorganizations to achieve improvements in educational equity and operational efficiency, educators and policymakers need to be sensitive to and tolerant of the rich diversity that characterizes rural schools.

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